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TEXT: The demands of a rapidly changing society and increasing pressure for desegregation (coupled with a rise in absenteeism, dropout rates, and academic failure in traditional schools) have led to the creation of over 1,000 magnet schools in urban school districts across the country. In order to facilitate the transition to a multiracial community and meet the prevailing desire for academic excellence, magnets have adopted innovative educational practices as an enticement for voluntary integration.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT THE POLICY AND OBJECTIVES OF MAGNET SCHOOLS?

Magnets meet racial quotas through voluntary enrollment and open access beyond

established attendance zones. They emphasize a special curriculum or educational structure. Magnets attract students and parents by creating supportive, personal environments while placing high expectations on student potential and progress.

Parents, students, and community members assess the needs of their school district and design a specific magnet program to serve these needs. Magnets, which are set up primarily to meet federal requirements for desegregation, are also proving to be successful in serving the specific interests and abilities of a diverse student population.

WHAT ARE SOME METHODS MAGNET SCHOOLS USE TO MEET THEIR OBJECTIVES?

To move from desegregation to integration, magnet schools often adopt cooperative learning activities, assign multiracial seating, and encourage small group discussion. Extracurricular activities and special projects provide opportunities for students to share diverse skills, and multicultural lessons are regularly introduced into the curriculum. With an emphasis on mutual respect and appreciation and examples of positive interracial relations set by the staff, a general atmosphere of trust and goodwill is nurtured among all members of the school community.

Student evaluations are based on progress and effort as well as achievement, and may be written as comments rather than grades, thus diffusing competition, lessening the tendency to stereotype or create hierarchies among students, and avoiding the sense of failure those in the bottom half of traditional grading systems tend to feel. Instead, students are judged by their capacity to better their last performance and fulfill their own preestablished goals.

From individually guided education to back-to-basics techniques, magnets appeal to student interest across race, age, class, and achievement levels by offering challenging courses that focus on special themes, and by using approaches that match individual cognitive skills. Teachers have the opportunity to circulate in classes and attend to the specific learning needs of each student. Generally small and flexible, magnets change curriculum to meet student needs and depend on a resourceful, dedicated staff and supportive community.

HOW ARE MAGNET SCHOOLS MAKING AN IMPACT?

Studies show that magnets improve minority achievement without hurting white achievement. Denis Doyle and Marsha Levine (1984) report that student attendance and participation are higher in magnet schools, as are teacher satisfaction and parental control. Relations between diverse groups are generally harmonious. These results allow magnet schools to challenge the assumption that standardization is the most equitable system. Magnets serve as pilots for effective educational change.

WHAT ARE THE LIABILITIES OF MAGNET SCHOOLS?

Magnets have drawn criticism for several reasons. Mary Haywood Metz (1988) observes that beneath the American concept of standardized education lies the belief that public schools serve as a testing ground for talent and ability, where the best necessarily rise to the top regardless of class, race, or sex. In fact, although materials and lessons may match, subtle forces such as atmosphere, expectation, and cultural differences play a major role in the success or failure rate among schools. Thus, more privileged families can choose to live near "better" schools. Magnets, by offering attractive alternatives and extending the privilege of choice to disadvantaged populations, draw fire as elitist institutions that challenge the myth of fairness in public school standardization.

Another charge is that of tokenism. Some claim that magnets' selection processes (which vary among districts) draw only the best students and teachers. Consequently, magnets, with the veneer of accomplishing desegregation, actually leave most minority students worse off than before, offering the district an excuse not to implement more fundamental changes.

Problems also arise when teachers are nonvoluntary participants who must radically alter their style to suit the program. To establish and maintain magnet objectives, principals often need to play a stronger than usual role in shaping policy, a dynamic which can lead to teacher resentment and upset the crucial positive character of these programs. Because enrollment is voluntary and selective, magnets have also been accused of paying less heed than other schools to the suggestions of parents and students.

HOW CAN MAGNETS MEET THEIR SPECIFIC CHALLENGES?

Magnets must appear attractive but not elitist by appealing to interest rather than ability. They must appear diverse but not second-rate by providing sound criteria and objectives. They must develop in students both the ability to work cooperatively with persons of different backgrounds and skills and the ability to take responsibility for their own progress in learning. Magnets must respond to constituent needs--welcoming continual parent, community, teacher, and student input in design and direction--and make special efforts to encourage participation by the most marginalized and disadvantaged populations.

Magnet schools' innovative style should be guided, Metz (1986) advises, by leadership that can be strong without disempowering its staff. To remain viable, magnets must not be seen as temporary or experimental, but must participate in a mutually beneficial relationship with the regular schools. They must locate in neutral neighborhoods and avoid situations that indirectly discriminate (by causing, for example, black students to bus farther than whites). To avoid tokenism, George Tsapatsaris (1985) recommends that an array of magnets should be established until all children have the real option to attend schools of their choice. Furthermore, consistent long-term evaluation should be

implemented to provide feedback on the effectiveness and future direction of each program.

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